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ABSTRACT

This paper brings together ideas from feminist epistemology and critical theory to initiate a conversation on repressed or distorted communication. It argues that current feminist epistemological studies of women's ways of knowing, making sense, and solving problems can and should inform attempts to empower democratic dialogues and restructure the public sphere. The paper makes this argument by examining some feminist deconstructions of the gendered silences cultivated by androcentric theories of political discourse and participatory democracy; exploring the promises of feminist reconstructions of models of rationality, communication, and community--"motherwit"--as well as some of the limitations of these models as vehicles for recreating participatory democracy; reviewing what we know about gendered differences in strategies and structures for organizing social action; and speculating on how feminist materialism can contribute to emancipatory attempts to recreate dialogue and democracy. The paper is in seven sections: (1) Introduction: Social Capital and Socially Structured Silences; (2) Gendered Silences; (3) Reconstructing the Public Sphere: The Limitations of Motherwit; (4) Beyond the Kitchen Sink: How Women Conceive and Organize Social Action; (5) Gendered Organizational Discourse; (6) Women's Organizational Strategies; and (7) Implications: Breaking the Silences in Theories of Democratic Discourse. Forty-eight references are attached. (SR)

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# Feminist Materialism: The Challenge to Dialogically-based Theories of Democracy

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## I. Introduction: Social Capital and Socially Structured Silences.

The egalitarian social movements of the second half of the twentieth century frequently represent competing causes and constituencies. The one ideological bond that appears to unite them is the common conviction that the egalitarian revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth century promised more than they delivered: they secured the freedom of the prosperous classes in the prosperous nations of the world at the expense of their less prosperous sisters and brothers throughout the world.

Within the past two decades there has been a growing awareness on the part of social theorists and activists that these inequitable social arrangements are secured and maintained by unequal distributions of communication resources: what I call socially structured silences (Jansen 1988). These silences are gaps in the dominant discourse of society which are structured and enforced on the basis of gender, class, color, and age, or perceived physical or mental competencies. These silences are enforced by subtle but often intractable differences in access to the information, credentialling, technological, behavioral, and linguistic codes --the social capital-- needed to enter into the conversations of the dominant culture. These silences reflect, sustain, police, and extend unequal distributions of material resources. As a result, social theorists have increasingly focused their attention on language, discourse, and textual analysis: thus, for example, Jurgen Habermas contends, "Today the problem of language has replaced the traditional problem of consciousness" (1971, p. 220).

Habermas has, of course, attempted to address the problem of socially structured silences. Although his ground-breaking 1968 critique of instrumentalism, Knowledge and Human Interests, has been overshadowed by recent popularizations of Michel Foucault's interrogations of power-knowledge, it remains a responsive and responsible attempt to confront the twin crises of rational argumentation and participatory democracy. Habermas has tried to construct a theory that can form the basis for creating a more egalitarian practice: emancipatory communication. His work builts, in part, upon the critique of instrumental rationality initiated by the German idealists, subjected to materialist revisions by Nietzsche and Marx, and recovered and given renewed urgency in the sociology of Max Weber, the existential philosophies of Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre, and the critical theory of the Frankfurt School. This critique calls attention to the crisis in reason precipitated by the advance of industrial capitalism; more specifically, it critiques the processes which have made instrumental values and modes of reasoning

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--e.g. efficiency, abstraction, quantity, expediency, functionalism, standardization, etc.-- the standards by which all modes of thought are evaluated. In spite of its promise, Habermas' project has been justifiably criticized on several grounds: it is idealistic, unintentionally but stubbornly elitist, self-contradictory, and contradicted by the conditions and constraints of real communication processes (Agger 1981, Pryor 1981, Jansen 1983). Nevertheless I believe it offers provocative openings for development of feminist theories of emancipatory communication for the following reasons: (a) Habermas' perspective remains the most ambitious and persistent attempt to develop a morally informed vision for the renewal of participatory democracy available outside of feminism; (b) it compliments feminism by addressing an issue about which feminism has largely been silent, restructuring the public sphere; (c) at the levels of metaphor and metonymy Habermas' quest for the "ideal speech situation" converges with feminist attempts to discover and empower women's "voice"; (d) it represents an alternative to the new gospels of postmodernism which valorize difference but have not yet articulated workable recipes for coalition or community building; (e) it can serve as a corrective to the temptations of some feminisms to ideologize, sentimentalize, and mystify domesticity, the private sphere, maternity, etc.

Conversely I believe feminist theories of emancipatory communication may be able to contribute to attempts to salvage neo-Liberal and neo-Critical theories of participatory democracy because: (a) it fills an embarrassing gap in these discourses by addressing the issue of gender-based socially structured silences; (b) unlike the concept of the ideal speech situation, feminist attempts to recover, discover, and empower women's voices are secured by lived practice in the real world where opposition and violence are still at work; (c) feminist heuristic models, based on sisterhood or friendship, are premised upon alliances of equals whereas Habermas's client-therapist model is secured within a context of unequal access to social, linguistic, and emotive codes; (d) feminism reclaims communal, nurturing, humanistic, and civic values that were stigmatized as "feminine" by the industrial, capitalist, and scientific revolutions; (e) feminist epistemologies offer comprehensive critiques of instrumental rationality that can build upon, correct, and inform the critique developed by Habermas, Adorno, Horkheimer and others; and (f) feminism vitiates against the determinism and pessimism that has disabled much of critical theory by suggesting possible models for mending (or at least tending) the mind fractured by instrumentalism. 1

In this paper I will try to initiate a conversation on repressed or distorted communication which brings together some ideas from feminist epistemology and critical theory. I will argue that current feminist epistemological studies of women's ways of knowing, making sense, and solving problems can and should inform attempts to empower democratic dialogues and restructure the public sphere.

I will make this argument by (a) examining some feminist deconstructions of the gendered silences cultivated by androcentric theories of political discourse and participatory democracy; (b) exploring the promises of feminist reconstructions of models of

rationality, communication, and community --motherwit-- as well as some of the limitations of these models as vehicles for recreating participatory democracy; (c) reviewing what we know about gendered differences in strategies and structures for organizing social action; and (d) speculating on how feminist materialism can contribute to emancipatory attempts to recreate dialogue and democracy.

## II. Gendered silences.

Debates within continental social theory have left their mark on the term, discourse. It has become highly nuanced. For this reason, my use of the term requires explanation and qualification. In using the term, I am referring to collections of theories, texts, and interpretive practices that form a more-or-less identifiable and integral (though not always insular) totality, perspective, or orientation. This use is consistent with Dorothy Smith's (1988) sociological interpretation of Foucault's concept of discourse. Like Smith, I recognize that women's perspectives and experiences --women's voices-- have been largely excluded from textually mediated discourses including the discourses of democracy. In sum, I treat discourse as a gendered concept and set of practices. Conversely, I use the term, feminist materialism, to denote sets of concepts and practices that try to critically confront and transcend the androcentric biases of discourse and the ruling apparatuses it supports. Feminist materialism takes the everyday labors, interests, joys, and sufferings of women as a legitimate standpoint for apprehending and knowing the world (Rose 1983, Smith 1988, O'Brien 1989). In short, feminist materialism provides an alternative standpoint for mediating and situating knowledge (Haraway 1988).

The studies of Carol Gilligan (1982) and others suggest the existence of gender-based modes of reasoning within Western culture; Gilligan documents the existence of two different but distinctive "voices". Until very recently the dominant, male voice has been perceived as normative: the voice of rationality, of public address, modernity, industrialism, and science. Within this frame, the alternative voice, the female voice, is the voice of the 'other', a deviation from the standard (de Beauvoir, 1952). Gilligan, Rose, Smith and others have tried to recover and validate the voice of the female 'other'; they have identified it as a submerged perspective or standpoint which fills some of the gaps and breaks some of the silences imposed by the dominant discourse. This submerged perspective represents what Raymond Williams has called a "residual culture"; it addresses "experiences, meanings and values which cannot be verified or cannot be expressed in terms of the dominant culture [but which] are nevertheless lived and practiced" (1980, p. 40). I see the feminist recovery of "her" voice as a emancipatory move for women, and a remarkable opportunity for the development of a dialogically-based democratic theory.

Liberal, Critical, and post-modernist theories of discourse are, by definition, logocentric. They talk about talk. They do not provide us with concrete plans for creating social structures which will either secure more equity in discursive practices or be

secured by more equitable patterns of communication. Yet, these are the avowed intentions of Habermas' critical theory, and Ackerman's neo-Liberalism. Foucault's intentions were less clear. He was more realistic in assessing the intractability of the knot that binds power and knowledge, but he renunciated all attempts to recruit his ideas into the service of political practice. Many versions of post-modernism go further. They are devoid of praxiological pretense and energy; they specialize in burnt offerings, theories of endings and ennui. They deconstruct the totems and texts of traffic signs, billboards, hemlines, rock lyrics and anthropological accounts but uncover no transcendent human desires, values, or ethics beneath, within or beyond textual conventions and interpretive practices. Feminist materialists are increasingly critical of postmodernisms because they declare the games of modernism, enlightenment, and participatory democracy over, defunct, beyond reclaimation just as women are beginning to negotiate strategies for restructuring the rules of the those games (Haug 1987).

In contrast to these (logo and androcentric) theories of discourse, emerging feminist standpoint perspectives draw upon and reflect a lived practice. For this reason, they can make a unique contribution to current dialogues on democratic discourse.

Because feminism represents an alternative to modernist, capitalist, and instrumentalism discourse, some social theorists see recovery of the nurturing values of the submerged cultures of female experience as the best hope we currently have for evading further devastation of the ecosphere and perhaps ultimately nuclear annihilation (Rose 1983, Caldicott and Leland 1983, Daly 1984, Caldicott 1987, Harris and King 1989, and others). I share this view, but with reservations. Three of these reservations warrant address here.

## III. Reconstructing the Public Sphere: The Limitations of Motherwit.

First, those who valorize the promises of feminist alternatives in ecological and peace activism, in aesthetics, pedagogy, and epistemology assume that since women think, talk, read and write differently from men (Farrell 1979, Greene and Kahn 1985, Moi 1985, Flynn and Patrocino 1986 and others), they will also behave differently. They will organize, assess priorities, and act different than men, and this difference will serve as a corrective to the destructive thrusts of male dominance. In short, they assume that an alternative, feminist informed, theory will generate alternative and more humane social practices. This assumption holds strong ideological appeal; it also resonates with gut-feelings that many of us trust. However, to date, there has been little systematic investigation of the organizational strategies and practices used by real women in natural situations.

Second, some of those who prematurely celebrate a feminist future ideologize and mystify the virtues of domestic culture; they see it as providing a viable alternative to dominant patriarchal, political and economic discourse and practice. Because the industrial revolution assigned women of all races and classes in

Western cultures different (or additional) responsibilities from men, most women have a more highly developed knowledge of domestic culture than most men. Since middle and working class women are generally expected to care for the young, tend to the sick, comfort the bereaved, mediate family disputes, cultivate manners and morals, conserve domestic values, and preserve family history and rituals, they have developed modes of knowing and relating which make them more aware of their own bodily nature and mortality and less willing to surrender themselves or their loved ones to the calls of distant trumpets, impersonal rules, abstract principles, patriotic ideologies or other categorical imperatives. Domestic culture preserves some residues of earlier aristocratic, religious, and civic cultures, but it is not anarchronistic. It is a living practice which addresses vital concerns of everyday life; it contains tested recipes for survival, keeps the homefires burning, tends to bodily needs, molds and sometimes maims psyches, and endows us with motherwit.

Because domestic culture represents an alternative, some social activists, epistemologists, and poets conceive of motherwit as a metaphor for deliverance. They find the answer to the angst of postmodernism to be as obvious as the kitchen sink. They assume that the residual text, the female principle, stigmatized and repressed by modernism, is the site for renaissance. They assume that a change in signs will mend the mind fractured by the industrial and scientific revolutions. In my judgment, they trade one partial vision for another. This trade leads either to separatism, as in Mary Daly's work (1984), or to a vision of public life that is politically naive and claustrophobic. Kathy Ferguson (1984) underscores the claustrophobic character of this conception of domesticity:

> A vision of public life modeled solely upon the domestic suggests a kind of over-confinement, an avoidance of chance and hazard. It puts too great a burden on the private virtues of attentive love and holding to expect them to constitute the entire basis of public life; to do so is to end up advocating a warm, mushy, and wholly impossible politics of universal love, one in which the very meaning of intimacy loses its integrity as it is diluted and applied to all (1984, p. 172).

In sum, it does not restructure the public sphere to make it responsive to the full range of human concerns; it replaces one form of distorted discourse, instrumentalism, with another. Motherwit is a necessary corrective to instrumentalism, but like instrumentalism it is a partial and incomplete mode of being, knowing, and communicating.

Third, those who see domestic culture as a ticket to the concert of emancipatory communication do not effectively address the question of male resistance. They do not tell us how to disrupt the dominant discourse, how to interrupt the conversations of men and make them listen. A generation ago, Simone de Beauvoir pointed out that men do not listen to women because

they do not have to. Most men still do not have to listen. When men do listen to women, it is when women talk about men or male concerns, not when they talk about domestic care and nurturing.

For this reason, separatism remains the most satisfying course of action for many feminist groups; however, this option leaves the environment and the species at great risk. Those who are not willing to take this risk may want to begin by trying to make men hear the way their discourse reads when it is is subjected to a the "semiological guerrilla warfare" of feminism (Eco 1983, p. 135). In my judgment, recent feminist critiques of Western science and attempts to empower alternative approaches to understanding and creating knowledge represent remarkable examples of the promise of this approach (Merchant 1980, Harding and Hintikka 1983, Haraway 1985, 1988, Keller 1985, Bleier 1986, and others).

IV. Beyond the Kitchen Sink: How Women Conceive and Organize Social Action.

These reservations lead me to the following conclusions. First, we need to begin to listen to what women say when they talk about organizing, problem-solving, assessing priorities, and dealing with issues of power and control. We also need to put that talk and the praxis it supports to the test. We need to systematically study, not ideologize, what women do when they organize for social action. Second, we need to begin synthesizing what feminist theories have to say about the limitations of instrumental/male rationality with what other emancipatory theories have to say about conditions for creating a revitalized public sphere. This includes examination of the organizational and material basis necessary to secure conditions for democratic discourse and democratic practice. Third, we need to directly address the question of male resistance and develop strategies for challenging and disarming it.

This is an ambitious agenda. My paper addresses only a small part of it. Specifically, it looks at some of the messages, metaphors, and images women construct when they talk and write about organizing and problem-solving, how they deal with issues of power and control, and what they do when they organize for social action. It suggests some points for convergence between these organizational strategies and the constituents of democratic discourse proposed by Habermas, Ackerman and others.

V. Gendered Organizational Discourse:

When men talk about organizations they use metaphors drawn from sport, the battle-field, and pornography. They invoke images of hierarchy, territoriality and violence (Tiger, 1969 ). When women talk about organizations their talk is less focused; that is, there is less gender-based consensus in metaphoric and metonymic references. Women approach organizational settings as outsiders; to survive, they often adopt the language of the land

but they usually speak it with an accent. A woman who talks like a fullback is not a woman talking from a position of strength.

When women draw upon their own experience to describe organizational processes, they use non-hierarchical even anti-hierarchical images (Daly, 1978, 1984), they invoke images of circles (Smith, 1978), webs (Gilligan, 1982), and net-works (Sacks, 1983). When women writers and artists develop iconic imagery reflecting women's experience, circular images are conventionalized (Chicago's dinner-plate/vaginas); within American feminism, contextuality, piecing, patching, and quilting are recurrent gender-specific images (Showalter, 1986).

Male discourse has highly articulated conventions for describing female experience through the "vessel" of the "other"; some feminists maintain this "damages" women's perceptions and "distorts" their conceptions of themselves and the world (Breitling, 1985). Some claim women have no language to describe their experience: that they have always spoken from "within" an alien tongue (Cixous, 1976). The salient image in recent feminist aesthetics and epistemology is that of woman seeking/dicovering/finding/recovering a "voice" of her own (Belenky et al, 1986).

2

VI. Women's Organizational Strategies.

In spite of this "damage", women have managed to give voice to their experience as aliens in male organizations, and to conceive of alternative practices. If the alternative views they articulate are conceived within the dominant discourse, they are nevertheless conceived as alternative or deviant views. When the feminists of the late 1960's and early 1970's envisioned an alternative practice in manifestos and plans for action, they envisioned organizations without bureaucratic structures (ideally without structure at all). They emphasized process and personal relations rather than formal rules, advocated decentralized, egalitarian decision-making, and saw skills and knowledge as resources to be pooled to enhance group efforts. Women's organizations are often grass-roots organizations involving face-to-face interaction. When Lois Gibbs organized the Love Canal Homeowner's Association, she began by knocking on her neighbors' doors and inquiring about their sick children. In contrast, when men organize male, mixed, or predominately female groups, they usually use bureaucratic (top-down) methods. This top-down approach has proven particularly lethal to women; when their volunteer organizations become successful enough to be "professionalized", female volunteers frequently become draftees in foreign regiments.

Women organizations are less likely to articulate formal divisions of labor than men's organizations. More often women identify tasks that need doing and work collectively to complete them, filling in as needed without formal direction. When feminist groups do introduce divisions of labor, they frequently use vertical structures rather than the horizontal patterns

adapted by men. In this way, creative and routine aspects of task-forces are dispersed among all the members, e.g the "work webs" at the Seneca Falls Women's Encampment involved a vertical division of labor. These differences in organizational strategies may explain the frustrations many women feel when men offer to "help" with domestic chores but do nothing without specific and detailed instructions. Conversely, they contribute to male misperceptions of women as disorganized.

These differences in task-orientation reflect disparate approaches to power. Where men in groups generally assume that a general, captain or coach will lead the charge, feminists conceive of power as a process rather than a privilege of office or person. Thus, for example, Nancy Hartsock defined power in terms of empowerment: "To lead is to be at the center of a group rather than in front of others" (Hartsock quoted by Ferguson 1984, p. 206).

The feminist rejection of or ambivalence toward hierarchy is not without problems (Joreen, 1973). Hierarchy is a founding principle of the power-knowledge of bureaucratic capitalism. Within the context of contemporary industrial cultures, it is grossly over-articulated even filtering down to and spoiling the fun of children's games, but there are some situations in which someone may need to be given hierarchal authority. When the ship is sinking, we may need a captain though probably not one who will put the women and children off the boat first. Nevertheless feminist suspicion of hierarchy provides openings for developing models for power-talk that keep leaders at the center of the group where members may be able to keep them from disserting their flocks. This suspicion may provide a point of departure for articulating a theory of power which can serve as a prophylaxis against the vanguardism that has persistently undermined the best intentions of socialist political movements throughout modern history.

Gender differences in conceiving and containing power lead some analysts to conclude that women are less competitive than men. My own observations lead me to conclude that women are not necessarily less competitive than men, but that they frequently compete in different ways. In hierarchal groups, zero-sum concepts of power tend to operate: I can only get to the top of the ladder by knocking you off or stepping over you. In groups where power is diffused, members can achieve goals collectively without sabotaging the efforts of their sisters. As a result women can still compete --that is, they can seek and achieve excellence-- but they can do it without establishing invidious distinctions between self and other.

## VII. Implications: Breaking the Silences in Theories of Democratic Discourse.

Jurgen Habermas maintains that democratic discourse can only be achieved if the following conditions are met: (1) all potential participants must have equal chances to initiate and perpetuate discourse; (2) all participants must have equal

opportunities to criticize, ground or refute all statements, explanations, interpretations, and justifications; (3) discourse must be free from the external constraints of domination, e.g. violence, threats, sanctions. Habermas maintains that existing public institutions do not meet these conditions. Bruce Ackerman shares Habermas' diagnosis of current political practice. He maintains that pulling rank, citing credentials instead of reasons, using technical data to obfuscate, and invoking procedural rules to mute or deflect justificatory dialogues are, by definition, illegitimate, repressive communications, violations of democratically grounded free speech. As Ackerman puts it, "A sustained silence or a stream of self-contradictory noises are decisive signs that something very wrong is going on" (1980, p. 8).

Feminist theorists would agree with Habermas and Ackerman's diagnoses of existing institutions in Western societies, but they would also point out that Habermas and Ackerman's works also sustain silences --make "self-contradictory noises"-- in their failure to systematically address the repression of women's voices. Nevertheless the rules of discourse Habermas and Ackerman articulate are far more egalitarian, humane, and reflexive than prevailing practices under bureaucratic capitalism or bureaucratic socialism. They are also rules that would be difficult to support within existing institutional arrangements. However it would appear that these rules are largely consistent with the organizational processes endorsed by contemporary feminist practices. While feminist organizations are not free of external threats, they do reject violence within their own organizations. Moreover the vertical task-orientation of women's groups is not likely to produce the kinds of invidious individual and group distinctions and arbitrary hierarchal assertions of authority which both Habermas and Ackerman agree subvert democratic discourse. In sum, the lived practice of women's groups may offer a suggestive model for undertaking larger experiments in democracy based upon egalitarian legitimating dialogues.

This conclusion needs to be tempered with caution for the following reasons. First, women's ways of organizing for social action have proven to be powerful tools of resistance. But women's groups are also extraordinarily vulnerable to cooptation. As an oppositional standpoint, feminism has developed strengths where the dominant discourse is weak, but it has not yet found a voice which can effectively interrupt or disrupt the dominant discourse on its own turf. Feminist organizational strategies probably cannot be used to infiltrate or reconstruct the bureaucratic structures that rule in the larger society (Ferguson). Second, the submerged text of women's culture also contains embarrassing silences. It speaks almost exclusively for literate, white, women of advanced industrial nations. Other voices need to recover themselves free of the ministerings of the Lady Bountifuls of the parlors of privilege. Reduction of theoretical standpoints into two codes is simplistic, arrogant, and imperialistic. It is a starting point which invites critique and amendment by other "others": women of color, people of post-colonial nations, etc. (Collins 1986, Spivak 1988). Third,

feminism assumes that changes in practices of daily living will transform attitudes and values. The recent history of the civil rights movement in the United States was also predicated on this assumption; all the evidence is not yet in but the evidence that is available does not support this conclusion. Pockets of progress within skirts of regress only advance those who are already at the seams of privilege. To date the material supports for most successful feminist organizations in advanced industrial countries have been generated by cottage industries, foundation supports, or the surplus capital of Ms. or Mr. Bountiful. Indeed the feminization of poverty has accompanied the reawakening of feminist consciousness (Ehrenreich, 1983). Therefore, we should harbor no illusions that feminism has solved the problems of cultural materialism; it hasn't but it does suggest some grounds for further conversations within critical theory.

The challenges of giving voice to submerged discourse have only begin, the challenges of giving voice to fully human modes of discourse and models of rationality are even larger. They require both women and men to remake words and recreate worlds.

Notes:

1
For discussion of the gender-based split in epistemology that accompanied the industrial and scientific revolutions, see Bordo (1986), Griffin (1978), Keller (1985), and Merchant (1980).

2
This section owes an enormous debt to Katy E. Ferguson's provocative and exceptionally well-documented but as yet under recognized, The Feminist Case Against Bureaucrcy (1984). My discussion of feminist organizational strategies is, of course, ethnocentric and largely (middle) class specific. I am discussing Western, primarily U.S. experience; I make no claims to universality nor do I imply biological warrants for any of the social practices examined.

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